



Safety, Wellness, and Youth Committee Memorandum

City of Arts & Innovation

TO: SAFETY, WELLNESS, AND YOUTH COMMITTEE **DATE:** JANUARY 21, 2026

FROM: PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT **WARDS:** ALL

SUBJECT: ABANDONED SHOPPING CART UPDATE

ISSUE:

Provide an update on the Shopping Cart Pilot Program and Abandoned Shopping Carts.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Safety, Wellness, and Youth Committee receive and provide input regarding the results of the Shopping Cart Pilot Program and the status of abandoned shopping carts citywide.

BACKGROUND:

On January 15, 2025, the Public Works Department provided an update on improvements made to the shopping cart retrieval program's response times, changes made to optimize service requests, and plans for broader outreach, data collection, and cross-departmental collaboration. The Committee asked Public Works to return with an update on abandoned shopping carts.

This report provides an update on the 3-month Shopping Cart Pilot Program and the Shopping Cart Retrieval Program. The pilot program aimed to collect data, evaluate operational efficiency and safety, and determine the feasibility of performing these services in-house. The report also summarizes operational data, enforcement sweeps, cost comparisons, and recent legislative changes affecting shopping cart management statewide.

DISCUSSION:

In response to increasing concerns about shopping cart blight throughout the City, the Public Works Department was directed to conduct a Shopping Cart Pilot Program to focus specifically on retrieving abandoned carts containing trash. This differed from the previous pilot program, which supplemented the work of the City's shopping cart retrieval contractor by collecting empty carts only.

The pilot began on August 6, 2025, and concluded on November 14, 2025. The data summarized in this report reflects activity through November 3, 2025, due to reporting deadlines. The primary objectives were to dispose of abandoned carts containing trash, collect and track data citywide

through the 311 app, and evaluate the operational efficiency, safety, and feasibility of doing these services in-house.

Pilot Program Operations

Public Works assigned a Street Maintenance Worker from the Street Maintenance Division to conduct daily, citywide observations for shopping carts. Carts were classified into three categories:

1. Empty, abandoned shopping carts
2. Shopping carts containing trash
3. Shopping carts actively being used by individuals experiencing homelessness

Each cart observed was reported through the 311 app for tracking. When an abandoned shopping cart with items was found, the worker photographed the cart and texted its location to the Public Works Analyst, who then relayed it to the Solid Waste Mitigation Crew. The Mitigation Crew was responsible for cart collection and disposal.

Collaborative Enforcement Sweeps

Two major enforcement sweeps were conducted in collaboration with the Riverside Police Department (RPD) and the Public Safety Engagement Team (PSET):

- September 17, 2025 Sweep:
 - Coverage: Magnolia/Jackson to Magnolia/La Sierra, including Van Buren and Tyler corridors.
 - Total of 45 carts collected, nearly all associated with homeless encampments.
 - One Mitigation Crew member collected 40 carts with RPD assistance, and another was limited to 5 carts collected due to arrests and drug-related activity in the area.
 - Staff from the Mitigation Crew later observed some individuals reacquiring replacement carts shortly after the sweep.
- October 22, 2025 Sweep (RPD only):
 - RPD conducted the operation independently, borrowing a truck from Solid Waste.
 - Approximately 40 homeless individuals were contacted, 36 carts recovered, and 24 citations issued.
 - Carts were emptied and transferred to the Magnolia Police Station for retrieval by the City's contractor, CarTrac, which returned them to retailers.

In total, 81 carts were collected during these sweeps, highlighting the importance of RPD's presence for safety during these operations.

Pilot Results

During the three-month pilot, 1,317 shopping carts were reported by Public Works and the public:

- 343 carts with trash
- 430 empty carts
- 544 carts actively used by individuals experiencing homelessness
- Approximately, 60% of the carts originated from Wards 5 and 6

Additionally, of the 235 abandoned carts with items referred to the Mitigation Crew:

- 118 were collected and disposed of
- 62 were no longer present upon arrival
- 55 were not collected due to a homeless individual being present

In total, 199 shopping carts with items were removed from city streets. The average response time for the Mitigation Crew was 1 hour and 38 minutes, varying based on workload, distance, and emergencies. When both employees were available or near the request, response times could be as little as 15 to 30 minutes. Response times could take up to 3 hours or more if they were across town and had to respond to multiple emergencies along the way.

Operational Challenges

The pilot identified several recurring challenges:

- **Safety concerns:** Approximately 23% of carts could not be collected due to the presence of homeless individuals. The crew was instructed not to engage for safety reasons.
- **Cart relocation:** About 26% of carts were no longer at the reported location upon arrival. It was not uncommon for Mitigation to respond in under 30 minutes and not see the cart in its reported location.
- **Initial reporting errors:** Early in the pilot, abandoned carts were often routed to other departments. After a new, temporary 311 solution was created by the Call Center for the purposes of the pilot on September 16, all requests for abandoned carts with items in them were routed directly to the Mitigation Crew.
- **Emergency response conflicts:** Severe weather, such as a windstorm that resulted in fallen trees and tree limbs citywide, cause delayed response times to ensure roads are cleared and public safety is prioritized. Additionally, the breakdown of vehicles led to slower response times, as the Mitigation Crew had to switch to smaller trucks with limited hauling capacity compared to the rear loaders which can hold up to 5 tons of waste.
- **Limited staffing:** The two-member Mitigation Crew operates on a 4/10 schedule, with one employee working Fridays and the other Mondays.

Cost Analysis

A cost comparison was conducted to determine the financial feasibility of continuing the collection of abandoned shopping carts with items in them in-house versus contracting the service out.

In-House Service:

- Two full-time Maintenance Worker I positions: ~\$153,000
- Disposal fees: ~\$13,000
- Equipment (F-150, utility trailer, 40-yard roll-off): ~\$71,000
- Total Year 1: ~\$237,000
- Years 2–3: ~\$167,000-\$168,000 annually

Contracted Service:

- Estimated \$155,000 in Year 1, \$147,000-\$148,000 in Years 2-3
- Contractor would collect carts with items and deliver them to the Corp Yard for a fee
- City would continue to pay disposal fees at the landfill

While contracting is slightly less expensive, safety was the primary issue identified from the pilot program. Carts containing items are typically surrounded by homeless individuals, requiring law enforcement or trained outreach staff for the safest and most efficient retrieval.

Shopping Cart Retrieval Program

CarTrac, the City's contractor responsible for collecting empty shopping carts, continues to perform efficiently. This fiscal year, 380 requests have been received, with 264 requests (approx. 70%) for cart retrieval completed the same day. The average response time has significantly improved, decreasing from 1.89 days in FY 2024/25 to just 0.31 days in FY 2025/26. This

improvement is attributed to a streamlined reporting process implemented in November 2024, which now sends 311 requests directly to CarTrac via email.

However, CarTrac has reported a decrease in shopping cart collections this fiscal year. Monthly retrievals dropped from 652 carts in FY 2024/25 to 365 carts in FY 2025/26 through October 2025. This decline may be due to improved communication among retailers, CarTrac, and Public Works, as well as direct service contracts between CarTrac and major retailers such as Target and Stater Bros. Additionally, enhanced cart security measures implemented in anticipation of Senate Bill 753 may have contributed to the reduction.

Legislative Impact – Senate Bill 753

Senate Bill 753, introduced in February 2025 and signed into law in October 2025, allows local governments to recover and return abandoned shopping carts and charge retailers up to \$100 per cart. This replaces the previous requirement to impound carts for 30 days and pay disposal costs as a result if unclaimed.

This legislation has prompted retailers to improve cart security, as CarTrac has reported decreased cart retrieval numbers statewide. Currently, the City of Riverside charges retailers \$20 per delivery, regardless of the number of carts delivered at that time. Adjustments to this fee structure may be considered as SB 753 takes effect.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact associated with this report.

Prepared by:	Alex Rendon, Principal Management Analyst
Approved by:	Gilbert Hernandez, Public Works Director
Certified as to:	
Availability of funds:	Kristie Thomas, Finance Director/Assistant Chief Financial Officer
Approved by:	Kris Martinez, Assistant City Manager
Approved as to form:	Rebecca McKee-Reimbold, Interim City Attorney

Attachments:

1. Heat Map
2. Presentation